

The god who was really a bandit

In the fourth in a series of articles based on exclusive interviews with *The Times*, Ilya Dzhirkvelov, a former KGB officer and Tass correspondent, reflects on the changes in Russia and in himself and his generation during the Stalin era and since.

Ilya Dzhirkvelov is not a dissident. As a former member of the KGB, he has little time for Soviet human rights activists. In his interview with *The Times*, which ranged from his boyhood years to the present, Mr Dzhirkvelov reflected on the changes in Russia over the past 30 years in a tone which suggested little sympathy for the Russian democratic movement. What he and his generation want, says Mr Dzhirkvelov, he is in his 50s—is a decent standard of living, a degree of personal freedom, but at the same time strong leadership, order and discipline.

Mr Dzhirkvelov, who was a member of the Communist Party for 34 years, looks back to the days of Stalin even now with a degree of nostalgia. A stocky, suntanned Georgian with close cropped white hair, Mr Dzhirkvelov recalls with animation how he joined the KGB—at that time the NKVD—in 1944, in the first flush of youthful enthusiasm.

To many people both inside and outside Russia the initials KGB or NKVD inspire fear and dread. But to young Ilya Dzhirkvelov, according to his own account, the Soviet security police was a fine, even glamorous organization, defending the state with stern but just measures in the tradition of the revolutionary Cheka. It also offered a stepping stone to privilege and power. Only later, says Mr Dzhirkvelov, did he understand that the victims of the secret police were the innocent casualties of a cruel, and arbitrary despotism.

Deported at gunpoint to Siberia

His first task was to help round up the Crimean Tatars, some of whom had fought for the Germans during the war. Most of these had joined Hitler's army under duress, in order to avoid certain death in Nazi starvation camps. This did not, however, save them from equally certain death at the hands of Soviet firing squads. The remaining Tatars were deported at gunpoint to Siberia and central Asia by NKVD troops, among them the 17-year-old Ilya Dzhirkvelov. Many died en route. The descendants of the survivors have still not been allowed to return to their homeland.

The wholesale deportation of the Tatars ranks as one of Stalin's most horrendous crimes.

only now realizes he was taking part in an act of inhumanity. "At the time", he says, "I thought the Tatar nation were traitors. I had not the slightest doubt that what I was doing was right."

Doubts did enter in, Mr Dzhirkvelov told *The Times*, as he became aware of the gap between the ideals proclaimed by the regime and its cynical, self-interested conduct of affairs. Even as a youth in Georgia, he says, he was struck by the fact that those in authority evacuated their own families to the Iranian border as the Germans advanced, leaving lesser mortals to their fate.

Georgia, he notes, is especially corrupt among Soviet republics and has the additional distinction of having produced two of Russia's greatest monsters in Stalin and Lavrenty Beria, Stalin's chief of secret police. Mr Dzhirkvelov saw Stalin at close quarters, together with Churchill and Roosevelt, when he was assigned to guard the delegates to the Yalta Conference in February 1945. For a young man of ambition, to guard the Big Three was to take part in an historic event. And to be close to Stalin was to be in the presence of a demi-god. "We thought he was Almighty, greater than the sun, more powerful than the Tsar."

Yet the doubts remained. In 1947 Mr Dzhirkvelov was sent to Romania to deal with "Nazi collaborators", just as he had in the Crimea. But in Romania hostility towards the Soviet Union was open and unchecked. Russian officers were jostled and obstructed in the street. It took two Soviet guards with sub-machine guns to persuade a reluctant Romanian landlady to offer Mr Dzhirkvelov and his new wife accommodation.

When two United States ships appeared off the port of Constanta with an offer of American grain, there were ugly anti-Soviet demonstrations. The imposition of communism on Romania, observes Mr Dzhirkvelov, left a legacy of antagonism towards Russia which still persists, as he himself found during frequent visits in subsequent years on behalf of either the KGB or Tass.

Outwardly, however, Mr Dzhirkvelov was an exemplary citizen. He was now married to a fellow employee of the KGB. (They were later divorced; his second wife and their daughter are with him in the West.) As a reward for loyal service Mr Dzhirkvelov was given a post in the First Chief Directorate of the KGB, which covers intelligence and counter-intelligence in foreign countries. He became an expert on Turkey and Iran and was entrusted with undercover missions in those countries, helping to foment sub-

However, the KGB was not without internal discords in these years. Mr Dzhirkvelov revealed in his interview with *The Times*. He cites the case of a fellow agent who at a KGB meeting ridiculed the practice of vetting candidates for election to the Supreme Soviet. If there was only one candidate, and he had to be approved by the KGB, surely there was not much to be said for "democracy" in the Soviet system. The "dissident" was expelled from the KGB for "Trotskyism and opportunism", and Mr Dzhirkvelov was himself chided for "short-sightedness" when he dared to discuss the case with colleagues. The incident also compromised the "dissident's" mentor in the KGB, Fyodor Bykovsky, father of the Soviet Cosmonaut, and like Mr Dzhirkvelov a KGB intelligence agent in Iran.

Degree of respect for Stalin

But it was the death of Stalin in 1953 and the subsequent arrest of Beria which caused the greatest tremors within the KGB. With the passing of the dictator, many KGB operatives feared the demise of the system he had created, a system which depended on the KGB for its very existence. In the power struggle which followed, Beria's colleagues in the Politburo manoeuvred secretly against him, fearing that the secret police chief would try to seize power. When the plot was ready, the Politburo pounced and arrested Beria at a joint session of the Council of Ministers and the Party Central Committee. So powerful was their fear of the KGB, however, that the Soviet leaders enlisted the aid of the Army, who brought tanks on to the streets of Moscow to prevent a KGB coup. The secret police were neutralized, and their chief was executed after a brief "trial".

Mr Dzhirkvelov recalls how he and other KGB officers sat at headquarters in the Lubyanka on Dzerzhinsky Square in Moscow and heard the list of charges against their boss. Beria, says Mr Dzhirkvelov, was accused of having been an "agent of international imperialism". This struck even the KGB as absurd. They were used to fabricating evidence of complicity with particular Western intelligence services, but to shoot Beria for being in the pay of all of them was going too far.

Mr Dzhirkvelov's attitude to both Stalin and Beria is coloured by the fact that both were Georgians like himself. Beria, he says, was on the whole "disliked" by Georgians, who considered him "cruel" even by their standards.

Their attitude to Stalin was more ambivalent. When in 1956

Khrushchev made his "secret speech" denouncing Stalin, there were mass peaceful demonstrations in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. The demonstrators wanted to know why "their" Stalin was being removed from his pedestal. The authorities panicked and sent in troops, who opened fire, leaving scores dead. Because of what Mr Dzhirkvelov calls these "tragic events", the disturbances in Georgia took an anti-Russian turn. He was sent by the KGB to Tbilisi—his home town—to find and punish the ringleaders. The KGB, he says, arrested 400 people, but no "instigators" were ever found, since the Georgian reaction to Stalin's disgrace had been quite genuine and spontaneous.

All in all, Mr Dzhirkvelov retains a degree of respect and even admiration for Stalin, coupled with a hint of disdain for the leadership of Khrushchev which followed. He acknowledges that Khrushchev brought a welcome "breath of fresh air" into the enclosed, paranoid world of Stalinism. But Stalin, says Mr Dzhirkvelov, was at least a "strong leader". His "cult of personality" was a real and fearful one, whereas the self-glorification of both Khrushchev and Brezhnev have been pale and laughable imitations.

Stalin, says Mr Dzhirkvelov, did "great service" to the Soviet state—a remarkable statement from a man whose own father, the deputy political commissar of the Black Sea Fleet, disappeared in the purges of the 1930s. The death of Stalin, he says, was none the less the "beginning of the end" for "those who had served Soviet power long and loyally". The KGB still had a role to play, creating subversion abroad and repressing dissent at home. But it resented the curbing of its powers under Khrushchev, and missed its father-figure, Stalin. "We thought Stalin was a god, he turned out to be a bandit. And we thought to ourselves: why should we trust this Khrushchev? Perhaps he'll turn out to be a bandit, as well."

What Mr Dzhirkvelov hankers after—and he says, "there are many who think as I do"—is a Russia with a strong central authority, but one in which a degree of personal liberty and expression of opinion is permissible. He looks back to the 1920s in the Soviet Union as an era when this combination prevailed. The fact that the KGB, which he is in some ways proud to have served, exists in order to stifle the challenge posed to authoritarianism by demands for freedom does not strike him as a contradiction.

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